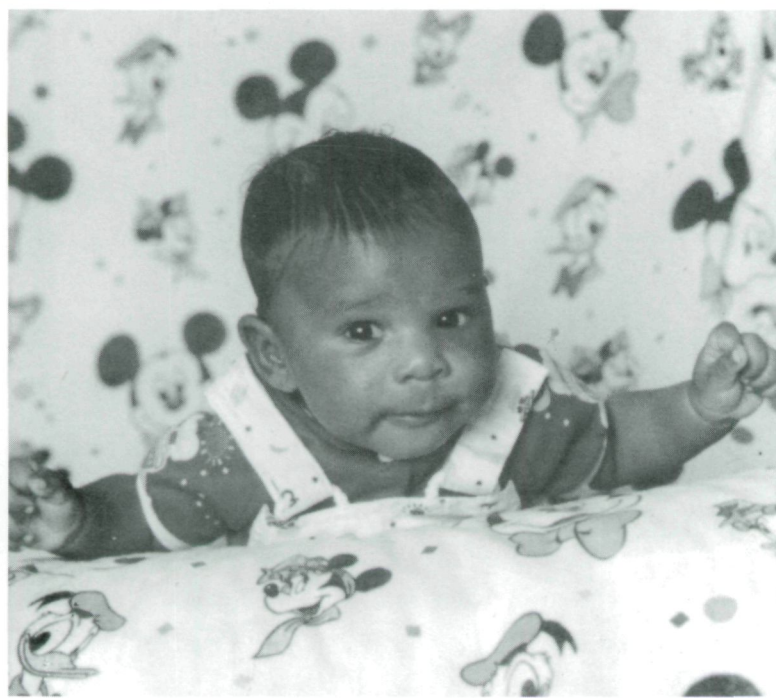




the Business of Healthy Babies



promoting prenatal health care in the workplace



Over the last several decades, infant mortality has steadily risen in the U.S., despite the existence of an advanced health care system. The primary cause of babies dying during their first year of life is low birthweight, which occurs when babies are born weighing less than 5-1/2 pounds.

Early and continuous prenatal care is a key to preventing low birthweight. Unfortunately, many women do not seek prenatal care because they do not realize its importance or because they cannot financially afford it. Women who do not have adequate insurance coverage for prenatal care and other maternity benefits are not likely to receive this needed care.

The business community has immediate and long-term interest in healthy birth outcomes. Infant mortality and low birthweight not only threaten the future workforce, but also the "bottom line" for businesses. Health care costs are now second behind payroll as the largest company expenditure, in part due to the expenses related to premature births.

Annually, the United States spends billions of dollars on neonatal intensive care, with daily costs ranging from \$1000 to \$2000 per infant. Compared to an average of \$3000 in delivery costs for a healthy baby, one premature infant can cost a company \$300,000 or more. This could bankrupt a company's health plan if it pays for all or a substantial part of its employees' medical claims. In the case of companies that offer medical coverage through traditional health insurance policies, the rising incidence of low birthweight infants could result in higher insurance premiums.

Businesses not only pay for the poor birth outcomes of their employees, but also for those of uninsured women and their newborns. In 1991, Maryland businesses shelled out nearly \$30 million for uncompensated care provided to uninsured women who had poor birth outcomes. As a result, many businesses have entered public-private partnerships to improve maternal and infant health care for all women, not just their employees.

The *Business and Industry Initiative* is one such partnership. Launched in 1992, by the Maryland Commission on Infant Mortality Prevention and the Chesapeake Human Resources Association, the initiative focused on providing information to assist Maryland businesses in promoting healthy birth outcomes. Businesses are encouraged to use this information to implement prenatal health promotion programs for their employees and neighboring communities.

Understanding the Risks

All women—regardless of race and economic status—who do not seek early and continuous prenatal care are at risk for having a poor birth outcome. These women are three times more likely to deliver a premature or low birthweight than women who receive care.

Additionally, studies show that teenagers, women over 35, and women who have not finished high school are at a higher risk for a low birthweight baby. African-American women have a higher chance of having a low birthweight baby by more than two-to-one over White women.

Women who smoke cigarettes during pregnancy have an increased number of miscarriages, low birthweight infants, and stillbirths. There is greater risk that their infants will die from Sudden Infant Death Syndrome (SIDS) or develop respiratory illnesses that may require hospitalization. Children born to women who smoke during pregnancy have lower achievement in math and reading, behavioral problems and shorter attention spans. Even pregnant women exposed to secondhand smoke have a slightly higher risk for a poor pregnancy outcome than pregnant women not exposed to cigarette smoke.

Women who use drugs and alcohol during pregnancy have a higher risk for low birthweight infants, ectopic pregnancy (pregnancy occurring in the fallopian tubes) and miscarriage. Babies born to alcohol consuming mothers may suffer Fetal Alcohol Syndrome, which results in physical problems such as an abnormally small head and underdeveloped body. Behavioral problems associated with prenatal exposure to alcohol include short attention span, hyperactivity and learning disabilities.

Women without adequate health insurance are less likely to receive prenatal care and more likely to deliver a low birthweight baby. Women who have had a previous premature birth, low birthweight infant, stillbirth, cesarean section or miscarriage are at a greater risk for a poor birth outcome.

In the Workplace

Exposure to certain chemicals and heavy metals, have been linked to miscarriages, premature births, still births, mental retardation and other birth defects. Dental hygienists, lab workers, and technicians may inhale mercury on the job, and women working with lead, batteries, and paint are at a higher risk for lead poisoning. Women working with glue and plastics, as well as women working on farms and in gardens have an increased risk for miscarriage.

Babies of women exposed to benzene are at risk for heart defects. Beauticians have a higher rate of toxemia, miscarriage and premature births as a result of inhaling chemicals used in hair care products. A 1988 Kaiser Permanente study revealed that women who worked on video display terminals for more than 20 hours per week during the first trimester had an increased rate of miscarriage. Studies also reveal that certain chemicals, such as vinyl chloride, and anesthetic gases, can cause mutations in the sperm of male workers that can lead to birth defects.

To limit employee exposure, businesses must make sure they follow State and Federal guidelines for the occupational use of these chemicals. The Environmental Protection Agency can provide additional information on proper safety specifications.

What Businesses Can Do

All poor birth outcomes cannot be prevented, but steps can be taken to minimize the number of women at risk. As employers of thousands of women, the Maryland business community is at the forefront of efforts to educate working women on the importance of early and continuous prenatal care. Additional benefits for businesses that implement prenatal health care promotion strategies include reductions in health insurance costs, improved productivity, lower employee turnover, improved employee morale, fewer absences, and earlier return to work after childbirth.

To Begin—Assess Your Business

Before establishing any type of prenatal health promotion program, it is important to assess the needs of your workforce. Analyze your pregnancy-related health care costs and look at the incidence of poor birth outcomes occurring to employees over a three-year period.

Your assessment may be based on the following sample questions. Tailor additional questions to your company's industry, locality, environment, and internal structure.

Sample Question for Assessing Your Business

Workforce Demographics

- Do you employ a large number of childbearing-age females (18-44), or a large percentage of males with spouses in this age range?
- What percentage fall into high-risk categories associated with poor birth outcomes described on page 3?
- Does a significant percentage of employees have a low reading level or speak very little English?

Workplace Safety

- Does your company have a history of premature births to employees? If so, have possible causes been examined?
- Are employees exposed to hazardous materials or situations? Can pregnant women temporarily transfer from jobs that require excessive standing, exposure to harmful substances, or heavy lifting?

Health Care Coverage and Office Policies

- Does your company provide sufficient health insurance for prenatal care, delivery, and related health care? Do employees fully understand their benefits and leave policies?
- Are part-time employees eligible for coverage? Is there a waiting period for new enrollees before they are eligible for full coverage?
- Are employees required to pay a large deductible for health care?
- Is there an appropriate maternity leave policy in effect?
- Does your company allow time off for prenatal visits? Is time off for prenatal appointments counted as sick, vacation or personal leave?
- Are pregnant women allowed to take frequent restroom breaks?

Next—Figure Potential Preterm Maternity Costs

To determine your company's needs and for evaluating the impact of any planned prenatal health programs, you must know the extent of your maternity-related health care costs. You

should review several years' worth of costs and review how much your company is spending for healthy births versus poor birth outcomes.

Here's a nonscientific formula to calculate your company's potential preterm maternity care costs.

Formula for Potential Preterm Maternity Costs

(Source: *Personnel Journal*, October 1993)

- 1) Identify the number of employees.
- 2) Multiply the number of employees by 2 percent (average percentage of women who will become pregnant annually) to find the estimated number of pregnancies.
- 3) Multiply the number of estimated pregnancies by 6 percent (average percentage of preterm births) to find the number of estimated number of preterm births.
- 4) Multiply the number of preterm births by \$20,000 (average cost of medical care) to find the estimated preterm health care costs per birth.

Sample "XYZ Company"

- 1) 500
- 2) $500 \times .02 = 10$
- 3) $10 \times .06 = .6$
- 4) $.6 \times \$20,000 = 12,000$

Then—Develop a Plan for Action *Prenatal Health Promotion Strategies—'A' to 'Z'*

After initial assessment and determination of labor costs and history, it's time to choose a prenatal promotion plan. Here are some strategies that businesses can begin implementing to reduce poor birth outcomes among their employees and community.

- *Advocate* the importance of early and continuous prenatal care for pregnant women by distributing prenatal health educational materials to employees.
- *Bargain* with your local March of Dimes Chapter for the purchase of prenatal health educational materials including brochures, posters, flyers, books and videos.
- *Create* inexpensive ways to promote prenatal care, including paycheck stuffers, buttons, and tee-shirts.
- *Develop* lunchtime health education seminars in partnership with a local hospital or March of Dimes chapter to promote prenatal care and healthy lifestyle choices.
- *Establish* an on-site health education library that includes a section on maternal and child health for employees.
- *Focus* on family-centered prenatal health promotion strategies for pregnant women and their partners.
- *Groups* that support pregnant women and their male partners allow the sharing of knowledge and experiences.

Businesses That Implement Prenatal Care Promotions May Experience...

Reduction in health insurance costs



Fewer absences during pregnancies



Lower employee-turnover rate



Improved productivity



Recruitment advantage



Positive public image

- *Hire* a staff nurse to identify and monitor pregnant women at high risk for unhealthy birth outcomes.
- *Invite* families of pregnant employees to participate in all prenatal health programs especially if they are insured through the company health plan.
- *Join* other companies in sponsoring community prenatal health promotion events and programs for employees in your region or county.
- *Keep* advertising the availability of prenatal health promotion programs to employees.
- *Limit* pregnant women's exposure to substances in the workplace that could adversely affect the unborn child and eliminate unsafe working conditions.
- *Mail* prenatal health education packets to spouses and dependents of employees.
- *Negotiate* elimination or reduction of prepaid deductibles and pre-existing conditions for insurance coverage.
- *Offer* health insurance benefits to part-time employees, their spouses and dependents, if your company does not currently offer such benefits.
- *Promote* early registration in prenatal care programs by offering incentives, such as savings bonds and gift certificates, to pregnant women who receive care early and continuously.
- *Query* employees regarding their knowledge of prenatal care and healthy behaviors to assist you in developing appropriate prenatal health education plans.
- *Recruit* a health education specialist to administer health promotion programs.
- *Start* prenatal education classes during lunch hours or offer discounts to local prenatal education programs.
- *Track* the number of poor birth outcomes before starting your wellness program and the number occurring after implementation.
- *Understand* the needs of families. Institute family-friendly policies and benefits that support pregnant women and families.
- *View* pregnancy as a positive, natural part of existence.
- *Write* about prenatal health information and your health wellness program in your company newsletter.
- *Xtra-curricular activities* are just what the doctor ordered. Sponsor fun activities like baby showers or other family health fairs for expectant parents as another avenue to educate them about the importance of prenatal health.
- *Youth activities* can be incorporated in xtra-curricular events as an incentive for the older children of employees to participate.
- *Zealously approach* any prenatal program you choose to implement.

Later—Evaluate Your Promotions

All prenatal health promotions should be evaluated for overall effectiveness. Keep in mind, you may not see major decreases in company-related health care costs right away, but do not give up on your program. Periodically reassess the needs of your employees to ensure that the program is meeting their changing needs.

If you find that not many employees are participating, you might look at more intensive promotion. Try suggestion boxes and short questionnaires to see if your employees like what you're doing, or have suggestions for improvement. Get help from the medical community. Teaming up with a local hospital could make your efforts more effective. Monitor the types of programs offered by others in your industry to see where your company fits on the spectrum.

The key to evaluation is having strong data on costs, pregnancy outcomes, and knowledge levels prior to initiating your program. After a specified period, you should begin to compare your health care costs prior to and after implementing prenatal health promotional programs and benefits. Have the number of low birthweight infants decreased? Are more employees seeking prenatal early and do more employees know the importance of prenatal care than did previously?

Remember that even if you have a predominately male workforce, you still need to pay attention to prenatal health. A poor birth outcome to the spouse of a male employee who is insured through the company health insurance plan could drive up health care costs for the company. Spouses of employees should be included in any prenatal program.

The overall goal is to make employees aware of the company's prenatal health benefits and

programs, and encourage their participation in these programs while reminding them to register for prenatal care early during the first trimester of pregnancy.

Facts & Resources

- Premature birth occurs when a baby is born before the 37th week of gestation.
- Low birthweight babies are born weighing less than 5-1/2 pounds.
- The duration of a full-term pregnancy is 40 weeks.
- A full term baby *can* be low birthweight, sometimes as a result of complications that hinder fetal development.
- A premature infant is may not be born at a low birthweight. There are cases in which premature infants are born weighing more than 5-1/2 pounds.

For more information:

- *Reproductive Health Hazards in the Workplace*. The cost is \$15. To order write to:

Superintendent of Documents
Washington, DC 20402

- *Healthy Babies, Healthy Business: An Employer's Guidebook on Improving Maternal and Infant Health*. For copies write to:

March of Dimes
Supply Division
1275 Mamaroneck Avenue
White Plains, NY 10605
FAX: 914-997-4672

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